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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an approach to foreign language teaching and learning that is being used to teach Russian to students at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, and English to students at Moscow State University in Russia. The approach relies on an alphabetical list of nearly 4,000 cognates and semi-cognates recognizable in both languages, along with sub-lists that group words according to themes. The lists serve as both textbook and dictionary, and with accompanying activities can be used independently or as a component of a formal course of instruction. The use of cognates allows students to assimilate the target language alphabet fairly quickly. From the very first session students are introduced to large numbers of words in the target language that they are able to pronounce and remember. Examples of sub-lists and activities are presented. (MDM)

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Plunging into a Foreign Language Without a Dictionary

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Lubov Dolinskaya

Plunging into a Foreign Language Without a Dictionary

The aim of the present paper is to share with you our approach to teaching/learning a foreign language,an approach that is being practiced at Moscow State University-English for Russian students-and at Bradley University,Peoria,Il.,-Russian for American students.

First, we would like to describe briefly how the idea came to be,then to acquaint you with the results of our search, and,finally,to demonstrate the practical application of the results.

Both students and teachers know how difficult the first steps in a foreign language are.A sea of new sounds,new words and new grammar engulf the learners who have all the feelings of a hopeless swimmer.

For many years the faculty of the English Department of Moscow State University has sought to find a methodical way of making first steps in language learning easier, more reasuring,and challenging. In other words,our task was twofold:to discover the 'bell' that could ring,and the way to make it ring.

The search was long and hard,but in the end rewarding.

We began with analysis of available text-books and found an obvious discrepancy.

There exists a huge bulk of words that could create a psychologically comfortable basis for a starting learner. The words in question belong to the category of the so-called cognitive words.We shall call them,for convenience,c-words. They represent a long known and thoroughly discussed issue.

Indeed,there is hardly a FL teacher who would not recognize the role the c-words play in the teaching/learning process, and there is hardly an LSP text-book in which at least some space would not be devoted to them.

However,what puzzled us was the following.

On the one hand,nearly all the authors of the LSP courses and text-books,while recognizing the necessity of developing the skill of 'seeing' and 'hearing' the c-words,supplement their texts with vocabulary lists in which the words,even such as TEMPERATURE,PROGRAM,DISCUSSION and so on,so obviously 'transparent',are given in translation.

On the other hand,most of the FL learners,while being aware of the existence of the c-words,generally fail to 'recognize' them even in writing and refer to the dictionary each time they come across what they think is an unknown word.Needless to say,it bores them,slows down the process of mastering the language,and all in all discolors the otherwise bright perspective of exciting learning activity.

We have made one more interesting observation.The c-words are mostly being dealt with 'on request',that is, when the circumstances(i.e.text) require it.

All said above made us have a closer look at the words. We decided to compile our own LIST of the c-words.For that a few newest and most complete Dictionaries,both English-Russian and Russian-English, have been scrupulously analysed. Our estimates have shown that more than four thousand words can potentially be 'recognizable' for Russian learners of English and for English learners of Russian.

It is understandable,that the LIST can easily be convertable, perhaps with slight alterations,into almost any European language.And that,in turn,means that,whatever our further findings,they can be of some use for teachers of practically any language.

Thus,the LIST was ready,and our next challenge was what to do with the words.Here we must reiterate that our purpose was entirely practical.

The most difficult task was where to start,what words to begin with,so that the students were encouraged,with the first steps they make,by how much(rather than how little) they already know.

We have tried many ways and,eventually,all the words have been analysed,classified and grouped,and assumed the form of

1) THE WORD LIST which includes about four thousand words arranged in the alphabetical order;
2) AMAZING WORD LIST for easy use meant for younger learners;
3) THEMATIC GROUPS of words comprising about twenty five topics,each consisting of twenty to fifty words.The topics included are
   COSMOS,LANDSCAPE,PROCESSES,NATURAL PHENOMENA, FAUNA,FLORA,NATIONS,PROFESSIONS,FOOD,COSTUME, APARTMENT,CITY,TRANSPORT,EDUCATION,SPORTS, CULTURE,MEDICINE,POLITICS,POLICE,INSTRUMENTS, PARAMETERS,MECHANISMS,MEASUREMENTS.

The LISTS have been compiled on the basis of the latest edition of The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary,Oxford Univ.Press,1989.

The three topics of the day - BUSINESS,SCIENCE,ECOLOGY - stand separately.They(each)embrace thousands of words and can be used for special purposes.

Our next step was to think of an effective way or mechanism that could make the bell ring.Of particular interest seemed to be the challenge of how to make the learners not only aware of the existence of the c-words,but also skilled in recognizing and actively using them.At the same time,the tasks to be performed were to be arranged in such a sequence that the skill of recognizing the c-words could effectively assist in developing all the skills necessary for mastering the foreign language,i.e. reading,writing,speaking and listening,both at their 'technical'level and on to the level of proficiency.That also includes the learner's awareness of the word marphological structure - word combinations - sentence - text - contextual anticipation,and so on and so forth.

To sum up,all our findings,however small,have been tested and verified in class with different age groups and different initial level of knowledge,as well as in different cultural groups,first English for Russian students and later Russian for English-speaking students.

The material thus collected has been arranged in three books which are expected to be published by Moscow Russian Language Publishers this year or in 1994. The series is entitled "A FOREIGN LANGUAGE WITHOUT A DICTIONARY".

The material is designed both for real beginners and for learners of intermediate/advanced level who are in the process of perfecting their knowledge.It is a practical guide to teaching/learning activities. They are concentrated on performing a number of clearly formulated tasks which need no specification.

The learner is led through the labirynth of exciting 'detective' assignments whose main,though inconspicuous, aim is search for similarity/difference in graphic/sound forms of the words of his mother tongue and of the foreign language, without referring to the dictionary.The 'reward' will be a self-compiled dictionary based on the suggested WORD LIST made up of several thousand lexical units.

The'self-sufficiency' of both the material and the tasks allows for varieties of teaching approaches and offers the teacher some flexibility in that he/she is not confined to any particular sequence or methods of presentation.Besides, and this is very important,the main emphasis is laid not on the memory/which may be a problem for some learners/ but on skill.Memorization ,useful as it is, sometimes is less important than skill.Often,separate words cloud the

picture,while the skill enables the learner to uncover more and more vocabulary layers.

The arrangement of the vocabulary into THEMATIC GROUPS helps to bring to mind the required set of 'known' words when needed. The whole bulk of the material may be used with and without the teacher's guidance.The challenging character and the comfort of learning creates good feelings and excludes negative emotions,which makes the learning enjoyable.

Now,before we come over to concrete material,we think it necessary to mention that the suggested linguistic material, together with the types of activities,does not imply that no other texts, text-books or tasks to be performed are either welcome or required.It is up to the teacher/learner to decide when,where and with what kind of material to supplement their activities or to start using the material of the approach we have elaborated.

For instance, a number of our findings have been used in the book "English for Geologists"/Moscow University Press 1991/the idea to use'familiar' words in combination with the students'background knowledge serves very well the purpose of developing communicational skills.

The Way We Do It.

From the very first steps of teaching,even at the stage of introducing the alphabet,we use every opportunity to 'surprise' the class.A tedious task of remembering the new letters becomes an exiting activity.At this stage particularly useful are dictations-translations.The students are intrigued by the very thought that they can translate/without a dictionary/and write a lot of Russian words from the very start.The words are dictated in the students'native tongue. The words are either absolutely identical,like

bank - act - focus - plan - protest - fact - disk -
test - class - process - period - meeting - moment-
status - park - port - stress - professor - contact
sector - student - contrast -drama - document -
granit - product - congress - optimist - metal -
cactus - scandal - atlas - atom - sponsor -cobra -
president - conflict - instinct - cardinal-comfort

or differ slightly in spelling/these are,wherever possible, grouped,with the model example given/:

army - category - colony - comedy - company -copy
base - figure - minute - pause - race - directive
bomb - command - emblem - form - mass - sum -ton
medal - model - moral - parallel - spiral

and so on.Thus,we usually introduce not less than a hundred words in the very first class.

The words for phonetic practice are not random either.

The activity is aimed at developing the skill of recognizing the c-words by way of correlating the graphic images with the sounds.The conclusions as to the similarity/difference in the native/foreign languages are made by the students themselves:

plan - fact - flag - act start - park -bar-class

test - press - tent - rent nerve- firm-flirt-turban

boss - bloc - stop - dock port -hall-cosmonaut-aut

clip - disc -system - pyramid fruit-ruin-soup-tourist

baby - lady - basis - status client - dialect -type-style

role -moment - focus -protest neutron - humor - music

guitar - intrigue - monologue - catalogue

method - synthesis - theory -thermos

division - illusion - collision - occasion

region - project - agent - privilege

equator - acquarium - quorum - qualification

finish - ocean - coefficient - proportion

lecture - structure - mixture -culture

chemistry - cholera - mechanism - character

reaction - information - mission -procession

charm - chief - chance - check

The parts of speech are also represented by a whole group of specifically arranged words,so that by way of correlation the students could make their own conclusions:

-Find the match to each of the English suffixes.

-ic ,-al,-ive,-ous,-ar/ary, -ory

/these words are given in Russian/

climatic-critical-ordinary-popular-competent-regular-
ambitious-mechanical-relevant-massive-periodic-formal-
tolerant-conspiratory-intensive-permanent-familiar-
academic-stationary-indifferent-industrial-illusory...

-tion,-sion,-ture,-ity,-y,-dure

evolution - productivity - chronology - corrosion -
temperature - illustration - ceremony - elasticity -
culture - discussion - symmetry - procedure -comission
emancipation -literature -federation -profession...

-ize,-fy,-ate

stabilize - activize - motivate - electrify - operate-
modernize - personify - illustrate - characterize -
compensate - classify - regulate - normalize...

At the stage of 'welcoming' the parts of speech we usually introduce the gender of nouns,declension of nouns,posessive pronouns,adjectives.We do translate from English into Russian,but all the translation is done without a dictionary.

The tasks gradually become more complicated and require more and more concentration:

- The odd man out:

pianist - bar - cafe -restaurant
golf - boxing - taxi - hockey
tomato - banana - lemon - grapefruit

-Group the words under the columns:

f l o r a - f a u n a - p r o f e s s i o n s

pianist pelican banker zebra rose giraffe

reporter tulip crab cactus mechanic bamboo

-Make up pairs of equivalents:

conflict	standard
norm	bard
copy	antagonism
test	model
poet	paradox
anomaly	experiment

-See if all the pairs are made according to the model:

b a r o m e t e r - i n s t r u m e n t

aluminum-metal	canal-profession
passport-document	pilot-profession
tennis-object	tango-instrument

The 'technical'side of the skill is proceeding to develop. The learners are entering the world of word-combinations, phrases,sentences:

-Match up the words and their definitions:

congress	a false idea
illusion	form of energy
electricity	a formal meeting
guitar	a musical instrument

-See if you can deduce the meaning of the underlined words from the contents:

Helsinki is the capital of Finland.

Anarchy is the absence of control.

Barometer is an instrument for measuring atmospheric pressure.

The above examples illustrate all the stages of developing the skill of vocabulary buildup based on the c-words.

However,our aim is to go beyond the boundaries of vocabulary building.What we are concerned with at present is the 'consumer's' demand.With the growing interest in the Russian language due to the changing political situation in the world,the issue of the day is providing the students with an effective short-term elementary course aimed at enabling the students to construct sentences of their own and to develop the language competence as the basis for their professional communication in a foreign language. For this purpose,just as for the purpose of vocabulary buildup,the c-words,together with the carefully selected elements of grammar and appropriate kinds of activity,could serve as a firm and reliable back-up.